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Book Review: Wardance

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Wardance

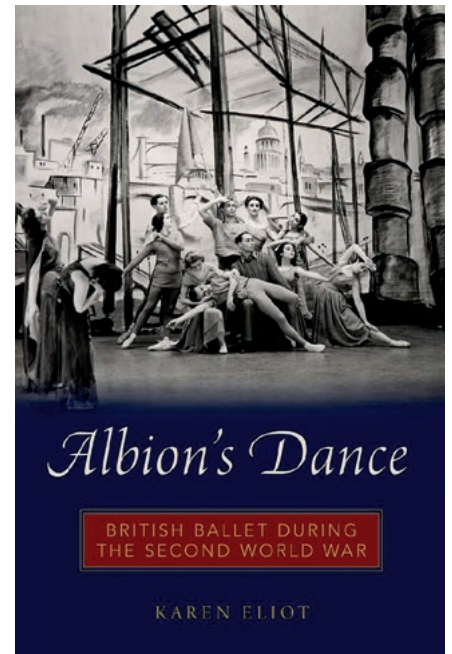
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Karen Eliot, *Albion's Dance: British Ballet during the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

There is a famous war-era quote attributed to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. When it was suggested that he cut government funding for the arts to support the fight against the Nazis, his fabled response was: “So, then, what are we fighting for?” Though this quip cannot be verified, the determination of Britons to fight to live according to their values and their steadfast refusal to be reduced to mere existence—even during the psychological unease of the “Phony War” and later the genuine horror of the Blitz—is both well documented and widely remembered.

Karen Eliot’s exquisitely researched *Albion’s Dance: British Ballet during the Second World War* provides a portrait of an important aspect of this time. Odd though it may seem, classical ballet actually flourished in Britain during the Second World War, and when peace arrived in Europe, English ballet found itself in a secure and respected place amidst post-war austerity. Eliot argues that despite the horror that reigned, the story of wartime ballet was more than a struggle of beauty vs fear. In retrospect, the war years provided a “discrete time period during which the British ballet formulated its identity as a classical art form after the eclecticism and choreographic experimentalism of the 1920s and 1930s, and describes a moment in time when ballet flirted with populism in spite of the pressures exerted by the dyed-in-the-wool balletomanes to guard its elitist status” (3).

Classical ballet has been seen as a “civilizing” force as far back as its inception in the Florentine ballrooms under the watchful eye of Catherine de Medici. In the early 20th century, it became powerful propaganda in the Soviet Union, which used both ballet and folk dance to bring the illiterate peasant population under the hopeful mantle of socialist realism. Later, ballet and, to a lesser degree, modern dance became tools of Cold War international exchange. In all cases, plots and programs were carefully designed to serve the “party line” of whomever was presenting the work. What makes ballet’s rise in wartime England particularly interesting, then, was its apolitical nature; instead of ultra-patriotic ballets that took political stances in the Soviet Union later in the century, it was the classical works that were presented to the public in England.



One of Eliot’s gifts is her ability to maintain an academic tone while explaining and contextualizing the many names and acronyms that pepper the ballet world in this period. These include the two main governing bodies that supported entertainment for civilian and military audiences: the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA)—the precursor of the British Arts Council, which focused on funding and supporting professionally oriented companies; and Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), which supported amateur groups as well as professional organizations. The author does not fall into the trap of simply tracking the work of the two great British balletic grand dames, Ninette de Valois (1898–2001) and her Sadler’s Wells Ballet, and Marie Rambert (1888–1982) and her Ballet Rambert. This is important because entire books could be written, for example, on the Sadler’s Wells Ballet company’s harrowing escape from the Nazi invasion of Holland. Eliot chooses to tell stories about other dances, choreographers, critics, impresarios and balletomanes

who worked with equal dedication, but less public prominence. These include sensitive portraits of Cyril Beaumont, and his legendary bookshop and back-room on Charing Cross Road, and Arnold Haskell, the fierce defender of ballet as an elite art, and his gradual conversion to the idea that British ballet was worthy of the affection and respect accorded his beloved Russian ballet. Eliot also assesses the work of P.J.S. Richardson, editor of *Dancing Times* and author of some of the most important primary-source material that exists

instead the costumes, sets and colorful plots that delighted British audiences used to traditional pantomimes? Mona Inglesby's International Ballet exemplified the populist view. Despite her youth (she began the company in her early 20s with family money), and her scanty preparatory training, her company was hardly an amateur affair. Nikolai Sergeyev (1876–1951), the famous former Imperial Ballet master who had smuggled notations of the great Russian classics to Paris during the Revolution, staged Act II of *Swan*

for both troops and war workers, and in London, a series of “lunchtime” ballets were produced at 1:00 pm in the cellar of a small theater. These became so popular that management soon added performances at 2:15 and, later, another at 3:15. Though the freelance dancers were unionized, there was little respite for these victims of artistic overwork; in 1941, women without young children were “called up” to contribute to war work. Performing professionally allowed these women to defer the call, which contributed to an eagerness to carry on with artistic work, however arduous. But things were far more difficult for men. Unless rejected for military service because of physical ailment (unusual among ballet dancers), there was no “decent” way of avoiding it. The emotional and practical difficulties took their toll, not only on individual men, but on ballet generally, which developed an overly feminine look out of necessity.

Eliot weaves in stories of individual difficulty and heartbreak with those of the fierce, resolute courage that was required to carry on with ordinary work and life in an extraordinary era. *Albion's Dance* provides numerous accounts of previously unpublished stories, explained in the context of the time. This is where Eliot's work shines: she has drawn a complete portrait of an art in an age, and one that inspires as much as it educates.

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on this period, including his erudite column “The Sitter Out,” a series as entertaining as it was informative.

Throughout the book, Eliot traces the key debate in the theatrical world at this time: should ballet be less concerned with strict classicism and move toward a more populist appearance? Should it embrace dancers with less pristine training and pedigrees and emphasize

Lake for the International Ballet in 1941, and in 1942, a full-length *Giselle*. Inglesby's company was dedicated to producing ballet as spectacle, with full costume and sets, and bringing it to all of Britain, not just the London elite. It contributed enormously to the affection for ballet that developed among the British middle classes.

These performances were not only a balm to war-beleaguered civilians, however. Ballet evenings were provided



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